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The Rottnest experience

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Abstract

This paper attempts to elucidate some of the diverse meanings that Rottnest has had for Western Australians. The psychological function of myth has always been to tell stories that establish exemplary models of behaviour and give dramatic substance to values, aspirations and conventions. Behaviour on Rottnest has many quasi-ritualistic elements, and the stories people tell about it are full of mythic overtones. Rottnest has played a significant part in sustaining Western Australians' self-image as a society that is friendly, gregarious, simple, unpretentious, physically oriented, pleasure loving and egalitarian. The paper explores some of these myths and their dependence on the physical characteristics of a particular place—the island of Rottnest.

Chronicle and myth

The history of Rottnest can be told in two ways. One is to give a chronicle of events. That has been done often for Rottnest. The broad outlines are very well known—the accounts of the early voyages of discovery, the settlement of Swan River Colony in 1829 and the plan for the township of Kingstown on the island in 1831 (from which the name of the Army settlement, Kingstown Barracks, is derived); the arrival of Constable Welch to take charge of Aboriginal prisoners in 1838 and the long subsequent history as a prison. An alternative use was foreshadowed by the increasing popularity of the island as a summer resort with successive Governors of the colony. Governor Fitzgerald (1848-1855) commandeered the original superintendent's cottage. Kennedy authorised the building of a new Government House on Rottnest and:

> 'a design was prepared by the Royal Engineers' Office in Perth and drawings were signed by Richard Roach Jewell, the Clerk of Public Works' (Commission for the National Estate, 1977, Book 1, p. 29).

The building was completed in 1864—although not precisely to these drawings—and first occupied by Governor Hampton.

Thus began the recreational use of Rottnest—at first for viceregal shooting parties, but in 1903 the prison was closed, the pilot station transferred to Fremantle, and the island proclaimed for public use in March 1907 by his Excellency Admiral Sir Frederick Bedford. The present and future primary use was then established. In the last half century a secondary use of the island has evolved as a laboratory for scientific research. This is not always compatible with unrestricted large scale recreational pressures, although of course science has a special rôle in monitoring the effects of such pressures.

The second and more difficult approach to the history of Rottnest is to attempt to elucidate its meaning. It undoubtedly has meaning. The island seems to hold a very special place in the minds and imaginations of Western Australians. It is treasured with a fierce affection that calls for explanation, which must form a significant element in any serious attempt at a cultural history of Western Australia. The complex of attitudes towards Rottnest appears to encapsulate many deep-lying aspirations about the good life, the nature of society, the proper relations of man with man and of man with the environment,

but the difficulty in writing about them is that they are hard to pin down, and those who attempt to do so generally turn quickly to purple prose eulogising that special 'Rottnest experience'. Despite the difficulties, this 'experience' is nevertheless the heart of the matter, and in considering the future of Rottnest, the conservation of 'the Rottnest experience' has to be the prime concern. The two National Estate reports (1977) tend to take a narrower view of conservation. One volume gives a very professional and necessary account of the history, present conditions and conservation needs of the built environment, and the second volume of the natural environment, but neither gives an adequate account of the experiential environment, although both are conscious of it.

Critics of literature over the last few decades have revived the word 'myth' to describe a form that deals in heightened experience similar to that commonly ascribed to Rottnest. Thus Northrop Frye says that 'myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire' (1957, p. 136). In popular speech, a myth is a commonly held belief that is not well founded, but truth or falsity are not applicable to the word as used by Frye, because myth is not intended as factual narrative. This is also true of the more recent extension of the word to some paintings—for example, Sidney Nolan's Kelly series is often described as having a mythic quality. Kelly is larger than life, both tougher and yet also more vulnerable, which accentuates the sense of courage and doom, further heightened by the bare, burning, harsh, beautiful background landscape. In this sense Rottnest too has a mythic quality as a simpler, better, truer world than the one we usually tread. The quality of Nolan's paintings would not be negated if historical research were to suggest aspects of Kelly that are not consonant with the myth, and the same holds for the myth of Rottnest. The important question is not to ask if it is 'true', but to ask how it is generated.

Islands and attitudes

Before looking at Rottnest in detail, it may be useful to consider the place of islands in our culture, because the mythic quality I attribute to Rottnest is part of a common response to islands. A current American television series bears the title *Fantasy Island*, in which the object of the host and management is to fulfill the fantasies of the guests—in short, to offer, if only for a brief moment, experience 'at or near the conceivable limits of desire'. It is not a very good television series, but it is skilful in identifying one of the things that people may want from islands. *Bali Hai* was of the same genre, with overtones of Paradise Regained thrown in. A number of films about the Tahitian islands have been more explicitly paradisal, offering innocent sensuality, with all the pleasures of the flesh but none of the guilts, nor the various consequences of overindulgence. The 'Noble Savages' of the French philosophes of the 18th Century are prominent in the cast of such films, and one of the intellectual antecedents of this set of attitudes towards islands is clearly revealed.

The promise of easy sex without penalty is also a conspicuous part of advertising in Australia for the tropical islands of the Great Barrier Reef, and an unwritten expectation of the very popular Club Mediterranée resorts, many of which are sited on islands. Wine flowing free like a fountain of eternal youth is a further attraction. Islands are intoxicating, but since all elements of myth can be interpreted at the level of the individual—Ariel or Caliban—for many, islands are a great place for a 'booze-up'. Those floating islands, the cruise ships, also promise similar delights.

Why do islands seem to encourage such behaviour? Because in some odd way, islands are perceived to be 'outside the law'. Some islands are literally exempted from some laws—for example, those who live on Norfolk Island, or the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands off the coast of Britain, pay no income tax. Norfolk Island is also 'duty-free', and most of the great duty-free ports, notably Hong Kong and Singapore, are islands. The perception of islands as being in some sense 'outside the law' is reinforced by the complex attitudes that have built up the tradition of 'holiday'. Holidays are today secularised, merely a period free from our regular work, but we nevertheless have special expectations of them. In earlier societies there was much variation—the holidays of Imperial Rome were different from those of the Middle Ages or Tudor England, but they also had some features in common. They were so exceptional in a life dominated by unremitting hard work, limited resources, ill-health and generally oppressive authority, that an inversion of order was not uncommon—the Feast of Fools in which anyone could be king for a day, and Bottom the Weaver adored by Titania, Queen of Fairies. The inversion of order was sometimes characteristic of special places, of which Prospero's island of *The Tempest* and the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's plays are perhaps the best examples in English literature. The Forest of Arden, the scene of *As you Like it* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not literally an island, but it has the characteristics of one, excised sharply from the cloth of the mundane.

An island such as Rottnest is not in reality outside the law at all. It is subject to the same laws as Floreat Park or Applecross, with regulations of its own as well. But the expectation of some release from the restraints of the mainland is strong, and this creates special problems of management, which must try to create a sense of freedom that is not socially or physically destructive. If people are not *given* liberties (such as the beautiful freedom from concerns generated by the dangerous motor vehicles of the mainland, and the tyranny of parking them), they will *take* liberties, for example by drinking too much and then going on destructive 'souvenir' hunts. Skilled management consists in walking this tightrope.

Because of the special place islands hold in our imagination, the way in which we reach them is very important to some people. In making a recent short visit to Rottnest in the course of preparing this paper, I told several old friends that I would use the air service, since time was short. The reaction was one of shock. 'Oh, no: you must go to Rottnest by ferry', thus observing due rites of passage between one mode of being and another. Arnold van Gennep (1908), a French sociologist, coined this phrase to describe the transitional rituals

accompanying changes of place, stage, social position or age in a culture. The rites have three phases: separation from the habitual social structure, detaching the subjects from their old places in society; a transitional phase; and finally, installation in a new context. The 'betwixt and between' phase corresponds to the ferry ride; van Gennep claims that in this phase, when people are liberated from their 'place' in the world, a spontaneous sense of community or comradeship may spring up. On the Rottnest ferry ride it is helped along if there is a shared experience, such as a fairly rough crossing. The trip is too short for the sense of community to grow very strong, although it may continue to expand on the island itself, of which more later. It is obviously one of the attractions of cruise ships and long bus tours, although attempts at artificial stimulation of this mood tend to be counterproductive, and inhibit its spontaneous generation. The importance attached to handling this transitional phase emphasises the ritualistic character of a visit to Rottnest for those who make it a cult; it illuminates the ceremonious vestiges in our concept of holiday. The ferry is traditional, and thus begins 'the Rottnest experience' at the jetty, slowing the clock and allowing sociability under transformed circumstances. It also includes an element of simplification and a rejection of high technology—already noted in respect of the automobile. Ferries are 'good', aeroplanes are 'bad', because aeroplanes are a contemporary technology, and therefore obtrusive. This attitude is neither logical nor consistent—the same people are usually happy to use the telephone on Rottnest, but then the technology of the telephone is invisible (it works by putting twenty cents in the slot). Regardless of consistency, the attitude is powerful and real.

Another important feature of islands is their legibility. Elisabeth Riddell speaks in a poem of the sailor who wanted an island that he could hold in his hand like a green apple. The 'best' islands are perhaps those that you can walk right round in a few days. If you can do it in less than a day, too small: if more than a week, as Kangaroo Island, too big—although you can explore Kangaroo Island by car in a few days, and perhaps that will do. There is a special attraction, probably atavistic, in beating the bounds and knowing the territory, which islands can satisfy beautifully by being so well-defined.

But the legibility of islands is not only physical; it is also social. As I have noted elsewhere (Seddon, 1972, p. 219), some functions are on public display on Rottnest and other islands of similar size that are hidden discreetly from view on the mainland. For example, the baker bakes bread, and you can see him do it, smell it, and buy it warm, a satisfying transaction. Arrivals and departures on islands are generally very public. On Thursday Island in Torres Strait, everyone who comes or leaves can be seen quite clearly from the bar of the most popular hotel. Air transport is less public, but most people still come and go to Rottnest by ferry, and are seen to come and go by half the population at the jetty, since this is an event. All of the island water supply and its power generating plant could be seen at a glance until a few years ago, but such facilities are too complex to comprehend so easily in the metropolitan society a few miles to the east.

In being legible and fully comprehensible, islands may offer deeper satisfactions than those I have touched on so far. There is a dream of self-sufficiency that found its richest fulfilment for me as a child in the children's novel, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and with darker overtones, in *Robinson Crusoe*. In both, the individual is able to make a world with his own hands. No island that functions as a holiday resort is self-sufficient in this way, but in being simpler and more comprehensible, may still satisfy this urge in part. On Rottnest, for example, most people most of the time are self-sufficient at least in their transport, by either walking or riding a bicycle, and this is a key element in the Rottnest experience.

The dream of self-sufficiency is the extreme of antisocial individualism, and is therefore often linked with the myth of 'the desert isle', which, ideally, is lush and tropical; not arid, but deserted of people. We would now say; 'uninhabited'. The wish to cut free from social links at least for a time is strong in some people, and it can be met on many islands around the Australian coast, although such islands are, almost by definition, difficult of access. It may be hard to have a whole island to yourself, but there are many islands around Australia where it is quite easy to have a beach to yourself. Even on Rottnest it is still possible to get away from the crowds fairly quickly, although perfect isolation can no longer be guaranteed. (Both 'isolate' and 'insulate' are derived from the Latin 'insula', an island.)

The legibility, completeness and clear boundedness or definition of islands has much to do with one of their major conceptual rôles in European cultural history, which is to serve as a locus for models of the ideal society. The *Utopia* of Sir Thomas More was an island; so was Bacon's *Atlantis* and, of course, Aldous Huxley's *Island*. Antithetically, they have also modelled dystopia, the corrupt or evil society, both in fact and fancy. Devils Island (Isle du Diable) the French penal colony off French Guiana; Alcatraz; Norfolk Island; all have a terrible history. Swift used islands for satirical ends in *Gulliver's Travels*. During the centuries of European exploration and discovery, islands (and those who lived in them) such as the Bermudas or the Pacific islands were seen as idyllic or barbarous, playing out a moral drama that is central to our culture:

> 'Both these attitudes to primitive man are deeply rooted in the past; and both found support in the behaviour of the natives, which was, as a rule, very amiable at first—as Caliban's was with Prospero and Stephano—but under provocation, and sometimes spontaneously, treacherous later. Behind all these observations are the two opposing versions of the natural; on the one hand, that which man corrupts, and on the other, that which is defective and must be mended by cultivation—the less than human, which calls forth man's authoritative power to correct and rule. This latter is the view which suits best the conscience of the colonist'
> (Kermode, 1966, pxxxvi)

It is symbolic that Rottnest, like Norfolk and Maria Islands and The Boys' Island at Port Arthur, should have been both light and dark, holiday paradise and aboriginal prison. In *Lord of the flies*, William Golding concentrates the conflict between the civilised and the primitive by showing both elements at war within a single society, a group of school children transformed by island life cut off from the familiar.

Islands have such a weight of symbolic meaning in our culture that the experience of them resonates in the mind and imagination, and in this lies much of their power.

Finally, islands may appeal to primitive survival instincts. Behavioural psychologists interested in recreation have long observed that there is a preference for 'edges'—that we choose for picnic spots or holidays a place that offers a transition between two environments, and that the strongest transition is that between land and water, whether it be that of river, lake or sea. To an ecologist, such edges are always especially rich, in that there is not only the flora and fauna of each zone, but those of the transition as well. Where forest meets pasture or meadow, for example, there are the birds of the forest, birds of the cleared land and, in addition, many birds that feed in the cleared land and roost and breed in the forest. The birds of the lakes and tidal zone are a similar example, and those of Rottnest are exceptionally rich. Even to those who are barely aware of their ecological surroundings, there may still be some dim perception of the richness.

The Rottnest experience

How much of the above is applicable to Rottnest? It is certainly seen to be 'outside the law' by many. Young people may described its principal attraction as 'getting away from home and parents'. Many people drink more, and this can be a problem for management, but if people must occasionally drink too much, Rottnest is a good place to do it, in that no one drives home, the drinking is usually sociable, and the sea restorative next day. Freedom of dress is complete, and although Perth dresses more casually than any place I know, people still enjoy the further freedom of going barefoot or in shorts and thongs. As noted above, freedom from motorised traffic is enormously important. Ten years ago, there were few roads and fewer vehicles. Mothers were free of the worry that their children might be hit by a car. Pedestrians and bicyclists scarcely looked behind them. There as still no private cars, but the Board and its licensees have a fleet of vehicles, and they are sometimes driven fast, especially in the remoter parts of the island, which should be the safest, so that this freedom may diminish as management tasks become more complex with increasing tourist numbers.

If Rottnest is 'outside the law', it is also 'outside time'; the clock runs more slowly. On holiday islands, time stands still, and this is always given as one of the attractions of our metropolitan islands. The 'slower pace of life' is perhaps most valued on Kangaroo and Phillip Islands, both of which have an indigenous farming and commercial life of their own, but one which moves more slowly than that of their mainland counterparts. Rottnest is too patently artificial to generate that response—it is too leisured to be leisurely, but people do go there to 'unwind' (a clockwork metaphor).

Since people go to Rottnest on holiday, the cultural expectations of 'holiday' discussed above apply, to some extent in a way that is unique to Rottnest. Although authority is not inverted, Rottnest is imagined as a great leveller, and this is important to Western Australians, who aspire to an egalitarian society, despite the marked differentiation in income and other resources on the mainland. Money won't buy all that much on Rottnest. The best and most expensive accommodation is not much better than the cheapest (even the new units at Geordie Bay have only marginally widened the gap); beer at the Quokka Arms is the same price for everyone, and the clear blue water of the Basin is free, as are most of the 'events', like watching the ferry come in, or walking up to Vlaming Lookout to see the sun set. This is an important component of the Rottnest experience, deeply valued, and one that should be maintained in future planning. Communal ablution blocks are cheaper, simpler and more egalitarian than units with en suite bathrooms, and part of the Rottnest style. The egalitarian 'feel' of Rottnest has complex origins. In a sociological analysis of the role of pilgrimage in the history of Western Society, Victor Turner (1978) surveys ritualised journeys—in both Mediaeval Europe and contemporary Mexico—with marginal notes on the secular pilgrimages of American society (to the Civil War sites, for example). He notes that pilgrimage has some of the characteristics of the transitional phase of the 'rites of passage': 'release from mundane structures; homogenisation of status: simplicity of dress and behaviour;' (p253), a sense of community or comradeship both on the journey and as a characteristic of the goal, which is itself a source of fellowship, healing and renewal. These characteristics have some application, not only to the journey to Rottnest, but to the experience of Rottnest itself (Rottnest as tourist Mecca?). The lack of defined status has much to do with the spontaneous friendliness so often encountered in unlikely places, such as the queue at the bike shop. One must add, however, that the claims to equality on Rottnest are in part specious and self-deceiving. Some years ago on Rottnest a friend pointed out to me the then Premier of Western Australia, Sir David Brand, padding down to the store in shorts and thongs. My friend glowed with pride, as if to say: 'There you are, he is just like you and me; there are no privilges of office here'—just as they had said forty years earlier of Sir James Mitchell, first Premier, then Lieutenant-Governor and finally full Governor (in 1948) as he took his daily stroll down St. George's Terrace and greeted his cronies (Bolton, 1972, p265); just as they said of Sir John Forrest's dedication of Kings Park in 1890 as a 'people's park'. Kings Park was open to all, but those who used it often in those early decades were those who could walk there from Mount Street, Malcolm Street and King's Park Road; the workmen and lower middle class of Victoria Park might get there once or twice a year as a special event. Similarly, few builders' labourers rent a cottage at Rottnest every year, although they are free to do so. The egalitarianism is in fact among equals, the professional and managerial class. The real distinction is between them and the day trippers.

Although it offers some freedoms, Rottnest also offers some structure, in a very pleasant informal way. Organised holiday camps, cruises and tours have a daily schedule of activities, often difficult to escape. So does Rottnest, but they are all informal and wholly optional, although with some regulars they are almost ritualistic. A swim at the

Basin before breakfast; the arrival and departure of the ferries; the arrival of the daily newspaper at the store, and of bread at the bakery; the 'sessions' at the 'Quokka Arms'; the several walks, as to the Lakes; the bicycle ride to the West End, and so on, all provide definite things to do, so that the sudden release from the timetable of the working week is not too unnerving.

Within this structure and its prescribed but informal activities there is excellent opportunity for casual encounter, and this is undoubtedly a major component of the Rottnest experience—'meeting people'. You can either meet people you know already, or meet new ones. The former is probably the more important, in that regular visitors are likely to be professional people, University students or Higher School Certificate students from the more affluent suburbs. Thus young doctors or lawyers or architects can run into their ex-classmates at the Quokka Arms, or in the queue at the Board Offices or bike shop or jetty or walking back from The Basin, and 'catch up on the news'. Meeting new people is largely an extension of this, in that in each of two small groups there will be a few who know each other, and a few who don't, who are then introduced, and who thus begin their relationship in an atmosphere of relaxed intimacy, perhaps the ideal context for striking up new friendships.

That Rottnest is legible, both physically and socially, has been noted already. Many people know the island intimately, recite the place names—Little Geordie, Parakeet Bay, Lady Edeline Beach, Lake Baghdad—like a litany, and are fiercely proprietorial in their attitude to the island. It is socially comprehensible because of its small size, the compactness of the Thomson Bay settlement, and the visibility of many public functions. The Manager, his staff, and the permanent residents are few in number, visible, and well-known to many people. The relative simplicity of the society is a satisfying contrast with that of the mainland.

The dream of self-sufficiency, on the other hand, is not nourished by Rottnest. It is not a lush tropical paradise, and it could not possibly support its holiday population without supplies from the mainland. The ecological diversity of Rottnest is not great in comparison with, for example, Fraser Island in Queensland, or Wilsons Promontory in Victoria (an island joined to the mainland by a sandspit), both of which are ecologically diverse, ranging from rainforest to heathland. Nevertheless, the richness in bird life, the quokka, the remants of low closed forest with its dense canopy of *Melaleuca* and *Callitris*, the attractive salt lakes, the complex indentations of the coastline and the abundant life of the offshore reefs are all part of the meaning of Rottnest for some people, and add to the density of the experience it offers. This is reinforced by the charm of the early buildings and their setting of great Moreton Bay figs and the sense of a long and varied history, including the wrecks around its coast, very well displayed by a 'Wrecks Trail'. The dark shadow still cast by the earlier use of the island as an aboriginal prison is also a part of the experience. So are the pedestrian scale, the compactness of the settlement, and the sharp definition between the world of man and the world of nature, although this is becoming blurred as 'development' goes on.

Rottnest as a metropolitan island

In serving as a playground for Perth, Rottnest is a special kind of island—a metropolitan island—but it is not unique in this. Each of the Australian capital cities has one or more islands to play with, and their history, character, land-use and management throw into relief some of the characteristics of Rottnest. Brisbane has Fraser Island and the islands of Moreton Bay, especially Stradbroke, Moreton and Bribie Islands. There are nine islands in Port Jackson, and more in Pittwater and the Hawkesbury. Melbourne has Phillip Island, and Wilsons Promontory, in effect, an island. Hobart has beautiful Maria and Bruny Islands; Adelaide has Kangaroo island.

Rottnest is perhaps the most accessible of all the metropolitan islands, only 18 km from Fremantle, an hour by ferry, half an hour by hydrofoil, 15 minutes by air. All of the other islands listed here require a substantial drive before the ferry ride. With Rottnest, the car is left behind almost at the beginning of the journey, since the Barrack Street and Fremantle jetties are within 20 minutes by car from most of middle-class Perth. Because it is so close, it is also the most visible; from all the suburban beaches, also very accessible to most of middle-class Perth, Rottnest lies clear and beckoning on the horizon, a continuing reassurance that escape is easy. The return view is perhaps more complex: the metropolitan coastline is equally visible from Thomson Bay, especially at night, when the lights aid identification of individual metropolitan segments and features. Thus escape is easy, but therefore not complete. Contact is maintained, a point emphasised by the telephone system: Rottnest-Perth is a local call. Nevertheless, the water barrier gives a comfortable separation, and the city can be regarded with impregnable detachment. Perceptually, there is a great sheet of bullet-proof glass between island and mainland.

Like Maria Island (discovered and named by Tasman in 1642), but unlike the others, Rottnest has a relatively long history, and a treasury of old buildings. Only Norfolk Island and Port Arthur have greater architectural interest, but neither is metropolitan and Port Arthur is a peninsula rather than an island. These two, Maria Island, St Helena Island in Moreton Bay, Dunwich on Stradbroke Island, and Rottnest, all have a history as penal settlements. Rottnest was the only aboriginal prison, however: Rottnest and St Helena are the only islands in which most of the prison buildings are still in use, and Rottnest is almost unique in Australia in that the accommodation is all publicly owned and managed. The Chalet at Mt Buffalo, managed—improbably—by the Victorian Railways, and limited cabin and lodge accommodation at Tidal River on Wilsons Promontory are the only parallels that come to mind, although good publicly owned accommodation is common in the National Parks of North America, South Africa, Malaysia, Thailand and many other countries. Portugal and some other European countries also offer State-run hostels in historic buildings.

Land tenure is also distinctive, in that there is no freehold land on Rottnest, and almost all the island is managed by a single Government agency,

the Rottnest Island Board (the exception being a pocket of Army land at Bickley Bay). Wilsons Promontory and Maria Island are also in public ownership, and run by National park authorities, as is Flinders Chase on Kangaroo Island and the northern end of Fraser Island.

In scenic beauty and in ecological diversity, Rottnest ranks comparatively low. The most dramatically beautiful are Maria and Bruny Islands, Bribie and Fraser Islands in southern Queensland, and Wilsons Promontory. All of these also have an interesting and relatively rich fauna and considerable ecological diversity, much greater than Rottnest. Both Wilsons Promontory and Fraser Island range from coastal heath to rainforest. Nevertheless, Rottnest is at least their equal as a base for scientific research, and it has a very significant research record, although all of the islands have been attractive to ecologists and other field scientists.

Success in the conservation of the natural environment of Rottnest must rank very low, especially in comparison with Flinders Chase on Kangaroo Island, Wilsons Promontory, Maria and Bribie Islands. Most of the damage has been done in the past by fire and quokka grazing and browsing. Vigorous efforts to control the quokkas and to reforest the island over the last few years have met with some success, but much of it still has the appearance of an arid steppe, botanically impoverished and visually monotonous. Its limestone headlands, clear white beaches and the turquoise and aquamarine waters around the island are its best asset. The lack of naturally occurring fresh water streams—available on most of the eastern islands—rules out the possibility of informal camping in natural areas. Rottnest is tied inescapably to a serviced settlement acting as a base for exploration by foot or bicycle for one day only—unless, of course you have the use of a mobile, floating minisettlement (or boat). It is not an arcadian landscape in any but the most superficial sense, and could never evoke a passage like the following from the Italian patriot Garibaldi, who landed on Three Hummock Island off the northwest tip of Tasmania in December 1852. Here he found a deserted farm with a rough but comfortable cottage and garden—

> 'a most useful discovery, as it enabled us to take on board an abundant supply of fresh potatoes and other vegetables.
>
> How often has that lonely island in Bass's Strait deliciously excited my imagination, when, sick of this civilised society so well supplied with priests and police-agents, I returned in thought to that pleasant bay, where my first landing startled a fine covey of partridges, and where, amid lofty trees of a century's growth, murmured the clearest, the most poetical of brooks, where we quenched our thirst with delight, and found an abundant supply of water for the voyage.'
>
> (*The Age 'Monthly Review'*, Vol. 2, No. 7, November 1982)

Rottnest imports its support systems along with its tourists.

Rottnest and change

Vlaming wrote in 1697 of the 'odorus woods' of Rottnest, and all early visitors to the sheltered eastern end of the island describe it as heavily wooded. The botanist Alan Cunningham, who visited Rottnest in 1822, was impressed with the abundance of cypress (*Callitris preissii*), whose dominance over the island was only occasionally broken by *Melaleuca lanceolata* and *Pittosporum phylliraeoides*. These three 'constituted the timber of the island', and *Acacia* seems to have been relatively uncommon. The island had been protected from aboriginal 'fire-stick farming' for 6 000 years or so, and it had evolved on its neutral soils a dense closed forest of cypress and moonah with a heavy, nearly continuous canopy and a forest floor of needles or a mat of fallen leaflets. Quokkas grazed on limited open ground such as the margins of the lakes. With settlement, cutting and clearing for timber and the deliberate and accidental use of fire rapidly reduced the fire sensitive *Callitris, Melaleuca and Pittosporum*. *Acacia rostellifera*, which regenerates well after fire, became common. Clearing and introduced herbs greatly increased the food available to the quokkas, which were kept in check by hunting until the 1920s; after protection, they began to expand rapidly. The vegetation of Rottnest now consists primarily of a heath made up of fire-tolerant plants unpalatable to the quokka (primarily *Acanthocarpus preissii* and *Stipa flavescens*), except in areas from which they have been excluded by fencing. Reforestation has been attempted since Somerville's day, with variable success. Tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) is not indigenous to the island, although pollen recovered from bores and peat samples shows that it once was. It has been planted quite widely, and although it survives, the trees do not thrive. They are ugly and mis-shapen, and detract from the landscape. Plantings of moonah (*Melaleuca lanceolata*) have been successful silviculturally, and some plantations will soon make an important contribution to the landscape, but they are only partly successful as the recreation of a natural environment, in that the regularity of boundaries and internal spacing are too evident. *Callitris preissii*, a tree of great beauty, especially when fully mature, is less easy to regenerate, in that planted specimens commonly die in about their seventh year. The small groves of mature cypress at Woodman Point and Coogee on the mainland show the beauty that Rottnest has lost. Recent plantings of non-indigenous plant material at Geordie Bay seem to me ill-advised. *Eucalyptus platypus* and *Melaleuca nesophila* for example, appear to be growing successfully, but they come from the south coast, and have no place in the Rottnest landscape. The Thomson Bay settlement has many exotics, including the great Moreton Bay figs. They are culturally appropriate to the 19th century character of the settlement, and enhance that setting, but they should not be extended beyond it. In an eighteenth century treatise, the Reverend William Mason gave the following good advice to landscape designers:

> 'Great Nature scorns control: she will not bear
> One beauty foreign to the spot or soil
> She gives thee to adorn: 'tis thine alone
> To mend, not change her features.'
>
> (Mason, 1778, Book 1, pp. 4-5)

His advice is very appropriate to Rottnest.

Conservation of the built environment at Rottnest is now of a very high standard, and appropriate

design principles seem well understood. This is apparent in the restoration of old buildings such as the barn built by Henry Vincent about 1857-1859 and now used as a museum; the chapel and old school house, built around 1862; by the design of new buildings, such as the villas at Thomsons Bay and the new units at Geordie Bay and Longreach, which still look a little raw, but show high standards of design; and from attention to detail, as in the removal of the verandah infilling at the Quokka Arms, and the dramatic improvement of the new cottages southeast of the hotel. (For a photograph of these cottages in 1970 see Seddon 1972, p222.) The face brick has been washed with Rottnest yellow, the tubular steel verandah posts replaced with masonry pillars, the wire fencing with masonry walls, and the offensive power lines relocated. The honorary architect to the Board, R. J. Fergnson, has served it well.

Perhaps the two most significant dates in the history of the island are 1839, when all land grants made on the island were resumed; and 1976, when a limited amount of good fresh water was found (in a catchment northeast of the lighthouse) after hundreds of unsuccessful bores had been put down. This supplements water collected from a bituminised catchment—an eyesore visible from the Longreach-Geordie Bay Road—and replaces the carting of water from the mainland. The proposal to connect Rottnest to the metropolitan water supply (e.g. see Martin and Associates, 1973) now seems most unlikely to be implemented, and thus planning for Rottnest for the next 20 years or so must take place within the water locally available to it. A sewerage system has been installed using sea water; a dual supply system has been installed at Geordie Bay; and there will clearly be no water for golf greens or lawns and gardens at Thomsons Bay. This is a blessing.

The future will depend partly on numbers and partly on management decisions. The number of tourist accommodation units has grown from 58 in 1960 to 290 in 1982. Visitors to the island numbered around 85 000 in 1968/69, and 242 000 in 1981/82. This included 192 000 day visitors in a year, making up about 60% of the total. These numbers are not great—Phillip Island in Victoria sustains around two million visits annually—but are substantial in relation to the kind of experience people have looked for from Rottnest. The number of boats attempting to anchor at Rottnest is increasing steadily, and swing mooring around the island is already at capacity. On the January 1980 long weekend there were 1 000 private craft in Thomson Bay alone. A marina is under consideration.

The next five-year plan for Rottnest was released by the Premier on 23 September 1982 (p82/758); it includes an upgrading of existing accommodation at Thomson Bay, the demolition of 23 old weatherboard bungalows, the construction of 40 new villa-style units (which currently have the best occupancy rates) and the undergrounding of power lines. Reforestation and dune control will continue and additional boating facilities will be considered. A new nursing post will be built if funds are available. These modest and conservative proposals met with some criticism in the press, mainly on the grounds that the simplicity of Rottnest is being lost as it is progressively 'upgraded'. A major concern is that every new development brings more sealed roads and more vehicles on them.

T.S. Martin and Associates (1973) predict that:

> 'at the turn of the century, Rottnest will have to accommodate a normal seasonal population of up to 10 000 persons'
>
> 'peak holiday patronage will escalae to 25 000 persons on public holidays'.

An English planner who advised on the future of Rottnest a few years ago gave his opinion that peak numbers might reach about 19 000, but that people would then say 'Rottnest is too crowded' and stay away. I know I would.

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